LIFE, July 30, 1971

China will talk from a position of strength

by EDGAR SNOW

Many are the answers and speculations offered to explain why President Nixon sought and accepted an invitation to Peking, but why were the Chinese responsive? Is it forgotten in Peking that Nixon built his early career on witch-hunting and climbed to the Senate and vice-presidency on the backs of "appeasers in the State Department" who sold China to Russia? Why should Mao Tse-tung, with a fierce domestic purge safely behind him, seeing America's Vietnam venture a shambles and believing its political and economic position to be in serious trouble abroad and at home, accept a belated olive branch? And if Nixon is not going to China just to eat shark fins, what may his hosts serve as side dishes—and what may they expect in return?

The question about Nixon has been partly answered for us by Chairman Mao in my earlier report. He told me that Nixon, who represented the monopoly capitalists, should be welcomed simply because at present the problems between China and the U.S. would have to be solved with him. In the dialectical pattern of his thought Mao has often said that good can come out of bad and that bad people can be made good—by experience and right teaching. Yes, he said to me, he preferred men like Nixon to social democrats and revisionists, those who professed to be one thing but in power behaved quite otherwise.

Nixon might be deceitful, he went on, but perhaps a little bit less so than some others. Nixon resorted to tough tactics but he also used some soft tactics. Yes, Nixon could just get on a plane and come. It would not matter whether the talks would be successful. If he were willing to come, the chairman would be willing to talk to him and it would be all right. It would be all right, whether or not they quarreled, or whether Nixon came as a tourist or as President. He believed they would not quarrel. But of course he would offer criticism of Nixon. The hosts would also make self-criticism and talk about their own mistakes and shortcomings—for instance, their production level was lower than that of the United States.

What has happened since January 1965 to change Mao's mind? At that time I asked the chairman if there was any message I might deliver to President Johnson, and his answer was *Pu-shi* (No!) and nothing more. Even so, Mao said then that one possible solution to the Vietnam conflict still was a new Geneva conference to end the fighting and guarantee Indochina's independence. That message reached the State Department, but the "option" was almost immediately closed out by Johnson's bombing of North Vietnam.

In an unprecedented gesture toward an American, Mao had author Snow at his side last year as he reviewed the October Day parade.

In that 1965 interview Mao had made it clear enough that he did not expect the Americans to desist until they had learned, the hard way, that they could not impose their political will on revolutionary Vietnam by military violence.

The Chinese believe that the lesson of Vietnam, and no mere change of Presidents, is what made it possible for Mao in 1970 to speak differently about Nixon. "Experience" had made Nixon relatively "good." Other major changes had also altered their view: antiwar resistance inside the United States; the formation of an alliance linking Hanoi, the VC and resistance forces in Cambodia and Laos, unilaterally backed by Peking. And there had been changes inside China itself, including the sobering growth of nuclear missiles and delivery capacity.

Theoretically, the Chinese believe, Nixon had various options along the way and did make use of them as tactical threats for a time—as in Cambodia and Laos. But the end was near. Once the decision was taken to get out of Vietnam, clearly a U.S. understanding with China became imperative. The President had not only to safeguard his rear against possible destruction by a China-backed North Vietnam offensive, but also to cope with domestic and world political repercussions of withdrawal.

That was the general view in 1970 from the Heavenly Peace Gate, but preparations continued for the worst. (Bad can also come out of good.)

In the summer of 1969, the Nixon administration had publicly urged an easing of tensions with China; later that year it had stopped the Taiwan Straits patrols and the Chinese took note, of course. The administration also proposed to resume the suspended Warsaw talks at any mutually agreeable time or place. In January 1970 preliminary Sino-American talks opened in Warsaw. They were immediately suspended after the Cambodian invasion. But Nixon went ahead, carried out a stage-by-stage elimination of trade embargoes against China, and lifted travel bans between the two countries. Early this spring a presidential commission advocated a U.N. seat for mainland China, for the first time officially calling it the People's Republic. Peking leaders remained suspicious—especially of a double-cross play between Moscow and Washington.

By late autumn of 1970 several urgent and authentically documented inquiries reaching China had indicated that the President wished to know whether he or his representative would be received in Peking. An indirect answer was contained in an interview given to me by Chou En-lai in November when he said that Sino-American conversations could be opened but only if the Americans demonstrated a "serious" desire to negotiate. To the initiated, "serious" meant, first of all, a realistic attempt to work out a program to deal with the Taiwan problem. As Mao and Chou see it, that was and is the key to all other Asian settlements. Evidently sufficient assurances were forthcoming. When Chou En-lai led my wife and me to stand beside Chairman Mao's side last October, and to be photographed at the anniversary parade, no American had ever been so noticed. Nothing China's leaders do publicly is without purpose. Discerning people realized that something new was happening. Then came the Ping Pong gesture. Chairman Mao had talked to me in December, and after the Ping Pong gesture I was able to report that he would welcome Mr. Nixon or his personal representative to Peking. A new horizon was already in sight.

My LIFE article was translated and widely circulated in China among political and army leaders. They could not, therefore, have been much astonished by the recent Peking-Washington joint announcement. Though China's press may carry only a few lines, the whole subject today is undoubtedly being cautiously discussed and explained down to the commune level. Only one thing may have surprised the Chinese: Mr. Kissinger's success in keeping his visit secret. Experience with American diplomats during World War II had convinced Chinese leaders that Americans could not keep secrets.

The Chinese are, of course, well aware not only of the international impact of Mr. Nixon's plans, but also of the domestic effects and side benefits to his present and future political career. Discussing Nixon's possible visit to China, the chairman casually remarked that the presidential election would be in 1972, would it not? Therefore, he added, Mr. Nixon might send an envoy first, but was not himself likely to come to Peking before early 1972.

By 1970 China had passed through the ordeal of a great purge, much time had been lost in domestic construction, and many fences had to be mended or newly built to end China's international isolation. The period of internal tension was largely over. Now, if there was a chance to recover Taiwan—Mao's last national goal of unification—and for China to be accepted as an equal in recognition of her great size, achievements and potential, why not look at it? Nothing in Mao's thought or teaching ever called for a war against the U.S. or for a war of foreign conquest, and nothing in Mao's ideology places any faith in nuclear bombs. The burden of building bombs and counterattack silos is very heavy indeed and likely to become more so; China has more than once called for their total abolition.

Very high among the reasons why Sino-American rapprochement interests China is to improve her strategic position in dealing with Russia. With America off the Asian continent, the danger of a Soviet-American gang-up dispelled and a seat of her own in the U.N., Peking's maneuvering power would obviously be enhanced.

Did Mr. Kissinger understand, then, that China was ready to talk from a position of strength, not weakness? China's leaders respect Kissinger. They know him through their own intelligence system and through his writing. Discussing him with an old friend and close comrade-in-politics of Premier Chou one evening in Peking, I was struck by his frank delight at the prospect of crossing verbal swords with such a worthy adversary. "Kissinger?" he said. "There is a man who knows the language of both worlds—his own and ours. He is the first American we have seen in his position. With him it should be possible to talk."

The immediate issues examined at the meeting between Chou and Kissinger—and the agenda ahead—are very concrete and could scarcely have been anything very new to either side. As the Chinese see it, solutions would involve these turning-point decisions for Nixon: (1) seating the People's Republic in the United Nations and the return of Taiwan to mainland sovereignty, (2) total U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam and arrangements for an international conference to guarantee Indochina's independence, and for a negotiated Hanoi-Saigon settlement which would preserve some shell of the American-made regime, at least for a decent interval, and (3) the establishment of formal Sino-American diplomatic relations. On all these matters, some rough negotiable script had to be brought back to Nixon to enable him to accept Premier Chou's invitation.

China's formula for Taiwan has always been negotiable whenever American leaders so wished. As repeatedly defined, it requires two steps: first, that the U.S. and China jointly declare their intention to settle all disputes between them, including the Taiwan dispute, by peaceful negotiation. Second, that the U.S. recognize Taiwan as an inalienable part of the Chinese People's Republic and agree to withdraw its armed forces from Taiwan and the Taiwan Straits. Specific steps on how and when to withdraw would be matters for subsequent discussion.*

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China contends that the dispute with the U.S. over Taiwan is an international question whereas her interrupted civil war with Chiang Kai-shek is a strictly internal question. Once American agreement to withdraw from Taiwan is conceded in principle, many terms would have to be defined. Peking is likely to be found reasonable in both the procedures for the dissolution of the American position and in dealing with Taiwan itself—perhaps even granting a degree of autonomy to Chiang Kai-shek if he should wish to remain governor there for his lifetime.

China will never publicly renounce what it considers its ultimate sovereign right to recover Taiwan by force if necessary. However, there is now a likelihood that a non-military solution will be worked out by the Nationalists and the Communist Chinese themselves. The opening of serious Sino-American talks may have already provoked renewed covert conversations between Taiwan and Peking in a search for the possible terms of assimilation. That is no doubt one of Nixon's hopes. Mao Tse-tung has pointed out to me that peaceful assimilation of Taiwan is his aim—reminding me of several cases in the Chinese civil war when other provinces acceded without fighting.

Nixon has now declared his readiness to see China seated in the U.N. But he also wishes to retain a seat there for the Taiwan regime. China will not enter the U.N. on that condition. Whether the U.N. members themselves seat Peking and simply drop Taiwan, or whether Taiwan withdraws its delegation in protest, the Chinese believe that Taiwan cannot long function in the U.N. once a majority of its members cease to recognize it.

A settlement in Taiwan obviously cannot be separated, however, from a cease-fire agreement and withdrawal in Vietnam, nor can the latter await the former. Nothing less than total evacuation of all foreign forces from Vietnam will satisfy Peking's Hanoi allies, as indicated by protests already coming from Hanoi and warnings to Peking against Nixon's perfidy. Peking cannot permit Russia to exploit differences of this nature, and it has surely been made clear to Kissinger that no Geneva conference solution can be advanced by China that does not have the full support of Hanoi and the NLF.

Such are the regional issues that must be settled before any across-the-board *détente* can be reached in East Asia and the broader Pacific. To define China's less immediate but parallel aspirations on a global scale is beyond the scope of this report, but that they include continued support for revolutionary struggle—"in the interest of China and the whole world," to quote the new party constitution—is obvious.

On his visit to Peking the President would be entering a nation with which his country has no diplomatic relations and one in which the real chief of state holds no executive office. Meet the party chairman Nixon certainly would, but in all probability Chou would do most of the negotiating.

What sort of man will the President see in Chou En-lai? Chou is clearly one of the world's ablest negotiators. Handsome and exuding charisma, he is, now in his 73rd year, tireless. In August 1967, Chou negotiated his way out of his most perilous moment in the Cultural Revolution. Though idolized by youth, he was, for more than two days and nights, surrounded in his offices in the Great Hall by half a million ultra-leftist Red Guards. Their leaders—some later arrested as counter-revolutionaries—were seeking to seize the files of the Central Committee—and Chou himself. Mao and Lin Piao were both absent. By talking to small groups, day and night, Chou gradually persuaded the masses—so Chou called them in talking to me—to disperse. It was only following that incident that Lin Piao brought thousands of troops into the capital, and the disarming and breakup of the Red Guards began in earnest—with heavy casualties.

Kissinger is said to have spent 20 of his 49 hours in Peking talking to the premier. That is nothing extraordinary. One of several interview-conversations I had with him lasted from the dinner table one evening until six the next morning. I was exhausted, he seemingly as fresh as ever. "I must let you get some sleep," I mumbled.

He threw back his head and laughed. "I've already had my sleep," he said. "Now I'm going to work." His night's rest had been a catnap before dinner.

Chou told me that he had taken one vacation —a week when he was ill—in ten years.

Carefully avoiding any thrust for personal power, he has been a zestful worker in pursuit of national and revolutionary power politics. Chou's affable manner masks viscera of tough and supple alloys; he is a master of policy implementation with an infinite capacity for detail. His personal contacts are innumerable. He combines an administrative efficiency hard to reconcile with his ubiquity. His self-effacing dedication makes him Mao's indispensable alter ego.

Symbiosis is perhaps the best word to describe their relationship. Very different in working style and personality, Mao and Chou complement each other as a tandem based on 37 years of trust and interdependence. Chou was never a mandarin but his grandfather was, and he confesses to a feudal background, although he spent 20 years in peasant surroundings as a guerrilla. Mao is a peasant-born intellectual genius to whose intuitive and experienced knowledge of the people Chou habitually defers.

Mao is an activist, a prime mover, an originator and master of strategy achieved by alternating surprise, tension and easement. He distrusts long periods of stability and is never satisfied with the pace of change, but he is practical and capable of great patience in achieving a goal by stages.

Chou welcomes the detailed execution of a plan —which bores Mao—and the more complex the problem the better. Chou quickly cuts to the heart of matters, drops the impractical, dissimulates when necessary, and never gambles—without four aces. Chou works best when the revolutionary pendulum has swung to a point of stability. He is a builder, not a poet.

In talks I have had with China's two great men it usually is Chou who meticulously answers the main questions and Mao who listens, adds a few words of caution or elucidation, and enlarges the broad and dialectical view. Chou attends countless large banquets, apparently with relish. Mao detests feasts and prefers small groups. Chou is an epicure but eats frugally, Mao likes simple food cooked in the hotly seasoned Hunan style. Both men drink very little, and each is highly disciplined in his own style. In negotiating with President Nixon, Chou will probably do the nitty-gritty work, in close collaboration with Mao behind the scenes. But the final decisions will be Mao's.

Whatever the Chinese may think of Nixon's motives, he has earned their appreciation by the courtesy of coming to see them, thereby according prestige to Mao Tse-tung and *amour-propre* to the whole people. Vassal kings of the past brought tributes to Peking, but never before the head of the world's most powerful nation. The gesture in itself may go far to assuage the rancor and resentment accumulated during the past two decades. There is some risk that the gesture could be misinterpreted to the Americans' disadvantage, but more likely it will be accepted with full grace and improve chances of mutual accommodation.

The millennium seems distant and the immediate prospect is for the toughest kind of adjustment and struggle. China must satisfy Korea and Vietnam, and the U.S. cannot jettison Japan. The danger is that Americans may imagine that the Chinese are giving up Communism—and Mao's world view—to become nice agrarian democrats. A more realistic world is indeed in sight. But popular illusions that it will consist of a sweet mix of ideologies, or an end to China's faith in revolutionary means, could only serve to deepen the abyss again when disillusionment occurs. A world without change by revolutions—a world in which China's closest friends would not be revolutionary states—is inconceivable to Peking. But a world of relative peace between states is as necessary to China as to America. To hope for more is to court disenchantment. ■